Conference of Practical Criticism in the Managerial Social Sciences

Call for Papers
Submissions are invited for a conference of Practical Criticism in the Social Sciences of Management to be held at the University of Leicester School of Management from January 15th - 17th, 2008.

Rationale
In 1919, the great literary critic and linguist I A Richards devised one of the most influential undergraduate courses ever taught. His method of teaching literary criticism through the close analysis of particular texts proved so popular with the Cambridge undergraduates that his lectures repeatedly overflowed into the street and were applauded with cheers and stamping. Largely thought he agency of one of his students, F. R. Leavis, ‘Cambridge English’ ended forever the belles lettrist tradition whereby the appreciation of literature was held to be the exclusive province of the superior sensibility. Against this kind of socially exclusive pretension, Leavis insisted that literature could only be properly understood through the application of critical intelligence to the text itself, in which democratizing sense it was accessible to all. Though yoked to moral preoccupations which few would find acceptable today, practical criticism as a method dominated the teaching of English for the next half century. In the process it destroyed a number of reputations which could not survive a close reading of the texts on which they were based, reputations which, in Leavis’ words ‘belonged more to the history of publicity that the history of literature’. Meanwhile, Richards’ Practical Criticism, the text based on that pioneering course of 80 years ago, remains an important teaching resource having survived the passing of Leavisite criticism as a distinct school.

It is our belief that the social sciences of management stand in dire need of a similar approach, albeit one which dispenses with Leavis’ narrow-minded authoritarianism. The aim is not censorship, but the subversion of a censorship and self-censorship which already exists. The young researcher today faces a situation in which the production of knowledge is dominated by reputations variously built on evidence-free prescription, on flat-earth empiricism or on flatulent and bloated ‘theory’, sometimes home-grown, more often imported and more often still, half-baked. The eminences in these fields of cultural production may be as much the product of what Bourdieu called ‘professorial power’ (and Leavis called ‘flank-rubbing’) as any qualities which their actual work may once have possessed. Certainly their current capacity to direct and constrain the effort of junior colleagues is so exercised. Examinerships, appointments committees, editorships and the advisory boards of grant-giving bodies and the managerial professions are used to favour loyalist pupils and infiltrate them into positions of influence. The result of this fissiparous, loosely structured but fundamentally authoritarian system is that the field of management research has become partitioned into a number of quasi-independent fiefdoms. Between them, there are long-running ‘debates’ whose inconclusiveness - and therefore continuity - is guaranteed by an imprecision of terminology, an inability to produce or criticise a logical argument, and an absence of recourse to evidence, sometimes combined with a principled avoidance of all three. Once they are up-and-running, debates of this kind
can develop into fields of knowledge production in their own right, each with its own institutional embodiment and its own established reputations. Within the enclaves of intellectual pretension created by these processes, the young researcher is under pressure to learn the outward gestures of enthusiastic conformity which all-too-frequently becomes inner motivation. This works to define the production of knowledge as the production of more of a particular same, acknowledging, in the process, the indebtedness to the particular authority which has laid down the template of that sameness. The outward signs of the process are a mass of inward-facing citations which further inflate the reputation of the authority at its centre, sometimes accompanied by more explicit, and so more excruciating, acts of homage in the text itself. It is all a long way from what research could or should be. Since ‘critical management’ has so obviously been caught up these processes, and may even have originated within them, we intend to hold a conference devoted to a critical examination of the academic bases of academic authority. The rules governing the contributions are flexible, but are basically those of Richards’ practical criticism. Texts which are influential in their particular fields of academic enquiry or managerial practice are to be subject to a detailed examination in respect of the arguments they make, the evidence, or the representation of previous scholarship on which they are based and the validity of their claims to have made important and original contributions. What is to be scrutinised, in other words, are the standards of scholarship which are being implicitly promulgated through the current influence-networks of managerial social science. This basic format may be varied at the discretion of the critic and according to the case in point. The examination may be extended to a number of works of a particular authority, or even a whole corpus. Critiques which extend beyond that to include the work of a whole school would probably be need to be excluded, partly because that would preclude the detailed examination of particular texts and partly because it is at this point that criticism tends merge into the boundary disputes already described. It is intended that the end-product of the conference will be an edited book of readings devoted to the close examination of prominent texts. It will serve the purpose, not only of questioning the bases on which academic authority is presently exercised, but also of providing models of practical criticism with the object of encouraging students to practice it on their own account.

Submission and Selection of Papers

Papers will be selected by a committee which includes Peter Armstrong, Campbell Jones, Simon Lilley, Geoff Lightfoot and Martin Parker of Leicester University and Stefano Harney and Cliff Oswick of the Queen Mary University of London. Please send abstracts, which should include details of the work(s) to be criticised and the grounds of criticism, via e-mail to p.armstrong@le.ac.uk by 31st July 2007. Successful submissions will be notified by 31st August 2007. Complete papers should be received by 30th November 2007.